

SPRING 2009



READY FOR THE NEXT CHALLENGE: Improving the Retention and Distribution of Excellent Teachers in Urban Schools

A Proposal by Teachers



**TEACH
+PLUS**

New opportunities & rewards in teaching

Who We Are

Much of the current policy discussion in education revolves around the relationship between teacher quality and student achievement: questions such as how to identify effective teachers, how to retain and develop these teachers, and how to ensure that effective teachers teach in the schools where they are most needed. The voices of teachers themselves, however, are often notably absent from the discussion. We believe that the expertise and experiences of effective teachers are critical if we hope to understand both what motivates such teachers to stay in the classroom and what causes them to leave.

We present this policy proposal as classroom teachers. Some of us teach in charter schools, some of us in traditional public schools, but all currently teach in urban classrooms. All of us are committed to closing the achievement gap and to addressing the equity issues present in education in general, and in urban education in particular.

In addition to our own personal experience as classroom teachers, we have spent the last year and a half participating in a rigorous policy fellowship designed to train successful teachers in high-need, urban schools to participate meaningfully in the field of education policy. We met monthly as a group, interacting with top policymakers and teacher quality researchers in each of our sessions. Between sessions, we read education research and cases of innovative practice in schools around the country. We brought our classroom experience and policy training together in developing this proposal. It reflects not only current research but also the expertise and reflection of the very teachers whom policymakers hope to retain in low-performing schools.

Underlying our proposal is a firm conviction that urban public schools can provide students with a relevant, rigorous, and meaningful education and in so doing play a pivotal part in the larger effort to combat issues of poverty and inequity in America. We believe that, *given the right supports and conditions*, there is no shortage of talented and experienced teachers willing to teach in low-performing schools. There are many teachers who are currently unsure if they will be able to build fulfilling and sustainable careers in their school buildings, but who are searching for reasons to stay. We count ourselves among them. We believe that teaching in high-need, urban schools is uniquely challenging but also uniquely rewarding. We maintain that so-called “hard-to-staff schools” are not inevitable.

Too often a deficit model is applied to urban children, urban education and the staffing of urban schools. The idea that no one wants to teach in high-need or low-performing schools risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. It must be replaced with the question, “What can we do to attract, retain and develop teachers who want to teach in these schools?” We hope that the school staffing model proposed herein can be part of that answer.

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Introduction

The greatest challenge facing urban schools today is closing the achievement gap. Thousands of schools around the country have been identified as low-performing, bringing a new level of urgency and focus to the problem, yet identification has rarely led to dramatic improvement.¹

While the problem is complex, it is principally a human capital challenge. Research indicates that improving the quality of teachers is the highest-leverage way to improve student outcomes.² Among the myriad interventions imposed on low-performing schools in the current era, too few are focused on the single feature that is essential to their success: teachers who have a track record of raising outcomes for urban students. We believe that dramatic improvement in low-performing schools requires a more targeted effort to attract strong, experienced teachers to those schools.

Across the nation, students in low-performing schools are too often assigned to the least-qualified teachers.³ Currently, there exists a pool of teachers who, given the right circumstances, are eager to take on the work of improving the nation's most struggling schools. These are teachers who have both passion and a proven record of success with urban students. The traditional education system has failed to consistently engage and retain this group of teachers. We believe that low-performing schools are not necessarily "hard-to-staff," but there must be a strategic staffing plan in place.

About This Policy Proposal

This is a proposal by early-career teachers in urban schools who have studied education policy for eighteen months. It is designed to give policymakers a window into our aspirations for our profession and to communicate unequivocally that it is possible to retain us and ensure that we are working with high-need students.

Following a brief overview of the proposal, we present:

- An analysis of the research on teacher quality and school turnaround;
- Case examples from our own teaching experiences;
- Our theory of change;
- The key features of our proposed staffing model.

This document delineates the principles that we believe should be involved in staffing low-performing schools. We are eager to work with policymakers, to fill in the further details that would be required for implementation of our model in schools and districts.

The Massachusetts Teaching Excellence Collaborative Model

The singular goal of the Massachusetts Teaching Excellence Collaborative (EC) is to improve struggling schools by staffing them with cohorts of experienced teachers who have demonstrated success with urban students.

Low-performing schools are typically sites of high faculty turnover. In fact, some face reconstitution of an entire staff at once. Too often, turnover simply leads to a revolving door of low-quality teachers because these schools lack the working conditions, the hiring flexibility, the funding, and the cache to attract strong, experienced teachers—and they lack a selection process to identify them. High turnover is a persistent and defining problem in low-performing schools. However, *high turnover represents a strategic opportunity*. Our vision is that whole school change must start with a critical mass of effective urban teachers in one school.

Students suffer every time public education loses a passionate, effective teacher. Often the loss is avoidable; were the right conditions in place, many teachers who look elsewhere for challenge and reward would likely stay. The EC model offers these teachers what they are looking for:

- Recognition as a successful urban teacher;
- A new career growth challenge that values continued classroom teaching;
- Differentiated pay that acknowledges their expertise and leadership;
- And, most critically, a team-based workplace that fuels teachers' passion for closing the achievement gap.

See Summary of Key Features on page 3.

The Massachusetts Teaching Excellence Collaborative is an approach to staffing low-performing schools.

- Each year, a subset of low-performing schools would become **Excellence Collaborative (EC) schools**.
- A key component of the turnaround strategy in these schools would be hiring **Excellence Corps teachers**, experienced urban educators who have been selected for their effectiveness with students.

A Research-Based Proposal

The Massachusetts Teaching Excellence Collaborative (EC) proposal attempts to address what we, as teachers, experience as the two greatest challenges facing our schools today. Those are *retaining strong, experienced teachers and turning around schools that are chronically underperforming*. Our approach to improving these two seemingly intractable conditions is based on a review of the research, as well as our own experiences. The following section describes the research that informed our thinking; blue shaded text boxes throughout the paper describe some of our experiences.

The Importance of Keeping Good Teachers

Teachers are the most important school-based factor in student achievement. A large volume of research across varied states using a variety of measures supports this conclusion.⁴ Multiple studies have shown that three consecutive years with a highly effective teacher can create significant gains in measurable learning for below-grade level students, in many cases propelling them to close the achievement gap with their grade level peers.⁵ Interventions that focus on teachers have greater potential to impact students than equal-sized investments that allocate additional funds to other types of reforms.⁶

Students benefit from the instructional mastery and school stability experienced teachers can provide. Experience has been correlated with effectiveness in the classroom.⁷ Virtually all teachers undergo a steep learning curve in their first

Summary of Key Features of the Model

A Cohort Model of Staffing

The Excellence Collaborative model is predicated on the assumption that there is a “tipping point” in school staffing where a dramatic shift in school culture is possible with a top-caliber teaching force. We propose a team-based staffing model. Teachers selected to the Excellence Corps must comprise a minimum of $\frac{1}{3}$ of the staff; in schools the entire staff might be hired based on the designation. (We believe that even in weak schools, there are strong teachers. While all teachers in the school would have to re-apply for positions in an EC school, we would hope to retain strong teachers with a history in the building.)

Rigorous Selection Criteria

The foundation of the Excellence Collaborative model is the recruitment of successful urban teachers. Minimum qualifications for the Excellence Corps would include:

- Three years urban teaching experience;
- Demonstrated effectiveness with urban students.

We, as teachers, are interested in working with researchers and policymakers to develop a high quality process for identifying successful urban teachers that allows us to target incentives toward retaining them and incentivizing their movement to low-performing schools.

Career Growth with a Focus on Continued Classroom Teaching

EC schools will operate with a model of distributed leadership that draws on teacher expertise to advance all aspects of school improvement. Being selected as an Excellence Corps teacher would mark a significant achievement in one’s teaching career, and something to which beginning teachers can aspire. We believe it is important to create career growth opportunities that value continued commitment to the classroom.

Differentiated Pay

Teachers selected to the Excellence Corps and hired to work in EC schools will receive a base salary increase of ten percent. Teachers serving in formal teacher leadership roles will be compensated with supplemental pay or a reduced teaching load. In addition, *all* teachers in EC schools will be eligible for schoolwide bonuses if the school meets its schoolwide achievement goals.

Dramatic Culture Change

Strong teachers avoid the poorest-performing schools not because they lack a passionate commitment to struggling students, but because the culture of those schools can work against that passion. Replacing the principal is a common strategy in failing schools. We believe that teachers need to be a part of the turnaround solution. The EC model is founded on the belief that culture can be transformed by a critical mass of teachers and a leader equipped to tap into their expertise. All teachers and leaders in the school would begin the school year with an intensive summer institute and engage in data-driven, teacher-led professional development throughout the year.

years in the classroom, resulting in greater effectiveness by year three than at the start of one's career.⁸ Retaining good teachers through a second career stage is an essential public policy priority.

In terms of student learning, we know that experience matters. New teachers lower student achievement growth by a statistically significant margin—and the teacher's level of effectiveness matters most with students who start below grade level.⁹ Yet those students who most often perform below grade level, poor and minority students, are also most likely to be assigned inexperienced teachers.

- Children in high-poverty schools are twice as likely to have a novice teacher than students in low-poverty schools;¹⁰ and
- Children in high-minority schools are twice as likely to be assigned a novice than their counterparts in low-minority schools.¹¹

If we ever hope to close the achievement gap, we must remedy this condition by ensuring that the most experienced and effective teachers teach the students in greatest need of their help.

The Problem of Turnover

Students suffer because schools have low expectations for retaining good teachers—and it is high-minority, high-poverty urban schools that experience the greatest staffing churn. Up to half of teachers assigned to urban schools leave within their first three years in the classroom.¹² And in many urban areas, such as Boston, African-American and Hispanic teachers leave at a higher rate than their White counterparts.¹³ Overall, the pace of attrition is growing steeper: the rate of teacher turnover has increased by 50% over the past 15 years.¹⁴

Some attrition is natural and even desirable, however, research suggests that we are losing the very teachers most likely to have a strong, positive impact on student achievement. A teacher's level of literacy and prior academic accomplishment are predictive of success in the classroom.¹⁵ However, in most urban districts around the country, those teachers with the highest levels of literacy and academic achievement are also the most likely to leave.¹⁶

There is a significant cost to teacher attrition that can be measured both in dollars as well as in terms of student achievement. The National Center for Teaching and America's Future estimates that teacher turnover costs our nation \$7.3 billion annually.¹⁷ Per district costs range from a conservative estimate of \$3.3 million in a smaller urban district like Boston to upwards of \$112 million annually in New York City.¹⁸ The main cost drivers are induction and professional development for newly hired teachers. Districts must explore innovative approaches to reaping a return on this sizable investment.

Retaining the Incoming Generation of Teachers

What will keep the incoming generation of teachers in the classroom? Early-career teachers, particularly those most likely to have a strong positive impact on student achievement want to grow and learn. They seek sense of success with students;¹⁹ they seek a wide array of career growth opportunities;²⁰ they seek a collaborative environment;²¹ they seek to be leaders.²² A 2008 survey of over 40,000 Massachusetts educators highlights the importance of teacher empowerment:

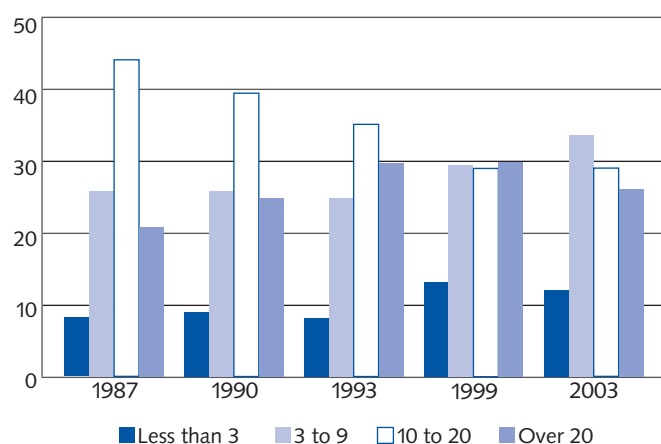
*Teacher empowerment is viewed as critical to teacher success with students and to their future employment decisions. More than one-quarter (27%) of educators report that empowerment is the most important teaching condition in promoting student learning, and the most important condition influencing whether teachers continue teaching at their current school (26%). Massachusetts educators, however, report that they do not feel empowered and engaged in educational decision making.*²³

What teachers typically find in the classroom is quite the opposite of what we seek. We find a profession that largely bears the imprint of its nineteenth century factory-model roots. Norms of egalitarianism, isolation and seniority rule

persist. Career growth and leadership opportunities are limited. In short, while the act of teaching may be appealing to many Generation Y teachers, the working conditions we find in schools are unappealing. As a result, many, like us, find themselves entering their second stage of teaching sitting on the fence about making a longer-term commitment to the profession. We feel that we are just hitting our stride in the classroom and we want to stay in teaching, but we also want new challenges and growth, and will leave if those are not available.

As we enter a major generational shift in teaching, it is urgent that policymakers listen to the voices of those who have the potential to be the future of the profession. 40% of all teachers plan to retire in the next five years.²⁴ Already, demographic profiles of the profession demonstrate a major shift is taking place. As of 2003, almost half of all teachers (45%) had nine or fewer years experience (See chart at right).²⁵ As teaching undergoes a major generational shift, teaching's future leaders need to be engaged in the process of re-making the profession.

Percentage of teachers by years full-time teaching experience



The Teacher's Role in School Turnaround

The federal No Child Left Behind Act, while imperfect, has shone a spotlight on school accountability. Five percent of schools are expected to be deemed low-performing by 2010 under No Child Left Behind. Five percent equals 5,000 of America's 100,000 schools. These schools serve over 2.5 million students.²⁶

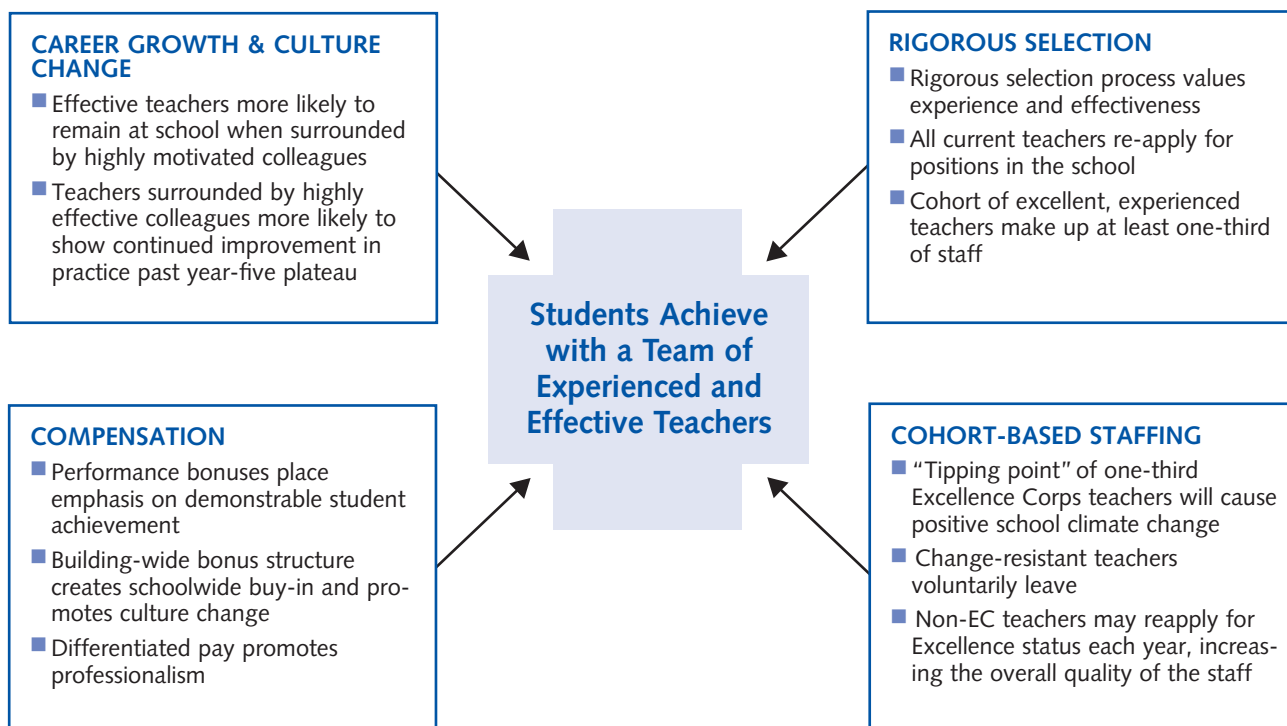
To date, intervention efforts as well as the research on those efforts have focused primarily on school leadership—most often embodied by the principal—in the turnaround. We argue that teachers are an essential component of school leadership and should be an explicit part of any school turnaround strategy.

Some attempts have been made to motivate high-performing teachers to teach in struggling schools. We argue that these attempts have been too few and that, in most cases, their strategy has been flawed. For example, the state of California offers National Board Certified teachers \$20,000 to teach in a "high-priority" school (\$5,000 annually for four years). New York State offers \$10,000 per year for three years. These programs have been met with limited success in terms of interest by teachers. In our view, money matters—but it is only one piece of a complex puzzle. Money does not outweigh a strong teacher's interest in having good colleagues and supportive working conditions.

The Equity Project, a new public charter school soon to open in New York City, offers a contrasting example of a strategy for recruiting effective, experienced teachers to work with high-need students. The school offers classroom teachers an annual salary of \$125,000 and has received hundreds of applications already. Is it because of the money? Certainly, it does not hurt, but we believe the biggest draw of the school is the promise of a first-rate school culture in which every teacher is valued as a professional expert and every teacher is committed to doing whatever it takes to ensure that every student in the school achieves at a high level.

Our Theory Of Change

We believe that by staffing underperforming schools with cohorts of effective, experienced teachers, and creating the conditions that promote retention, we can transform the cultures of those schools and dramatically improve student achievement



Key Features of the EC Staffing Model

Cohort-Based Staffing

An essential component of the Excellence Collaborative model is a new approach to staffing. Instead of filling individual roles, schools would commit to hiring a team of teachers who have been selected to the Excellence Corps based on common high standards. Corps members should comprise no less than one-third of the teaching population in a school. Attaining Excellence Corps status would be a visible goal to which teachers could aspire from the start of their careers, thereby promoting the retention of teachers who desire career growth and collegiality.²⁷

We believe that there is a “tipping point” in school staffing, when a dramatic shift in school culture is possible based on the composition of the teaching population.²⁸ Evidence from other successful school turnaround efforts suggests that shifting the composition of the staff while elevating expectations for all teachers can set the conditions for accelerated improvement.²⁹

As teachers, we know that it is challenging to be an effective teacher in a low-performing school. Effective teachers working in isolation struggle to impact school culture in ways that yield significant improvements in student achievement. This isolation increases attrition in schools where high-quality teachers are most needed.

Excellent teachers are vocal about the importance of a cohort of committed and collaborative colleagues, with many citing it as the greatest incentive necessary to bring them to a hard-to-staff school. In *Excellence Loves Company*, Ken Futernick gives ample evidence that strong teachers value strong colleagues who work as a team. The teachers

he studied reported that strong colleagues and strong administrative support were the keys to retaining them in the profession.³⁰ Further, research on Generation Y—comprised largely of Americans currently in their twenties—suggests that this generation places a high premium on workplace collaboration.³¹ While teaching has historically been a “closed door” profession, many young teachers seek opportunities to change that.

Although all teachers currently working in a school that becomes an EC school would be able to apply for Excellence Corps status, not every teacher will meet that high standard in the first year. We believe the presence of strong mentor teachers and a supportive school culture will encourage the growth and development of the professional practice of all teachers in the school. We anticipate that the cohort of Corps teachers will grow as more teachers within the school improve their practice and meet the high bar for Excellence status.

The incentive of a cohort will attract, retain, and develop teachers. Research shows that while teachers become measurably more effective in each of their first five years of teaching, after the first five years, teacher effectiveness hits a plateau.³² These data, however, are taken from the current model where excellent teachers tend to be dispersed throughout a district. The EC model will concentrate a significant number of excellent teachers in the same building. We suggest that being surrounded by highly effective colleagues will push the practice of both novice and experienced teachers, possibly stretching measurable teacher effectiveness gains beyond the typical year-five plateau.

Rigorous Selection Criteria

The foundation of the Excellence Collaborative model is the recruitment of successful urban teachers. Minimum qualifications needed to become an Excellence Corps teacher must include:

- At least three years of urban teaching experience; and
- Demonstrated effectiveness with urban students.

It is imperative that all candidates achieve a clear set of standards in order to qualify for the program. Most school districts have not been able to come up with clear definitions of teacher excellence, but we feel that it is a worthy and necessary goal. We recognize that many districts have begun the process of better evaluating and identifying effective teaching, and that organizations such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the Teacher Advancement Program are helping to create a teaching profession in which excellence is recognized and rewarded. We believe that all of these efforts can and should inform the development of selection criteria for the EC model. At the same time, we hope that the process does not become so cumbersome that it is unappealing to teachers.

We suggest the following as measures of teacher success that *could* be included:

- A unit plan demonstrating content knowledge and an ability to match it to pedagogy in a way that promotes enduring understanding;
- An analysis of student data that demonstrates assessment, intervention, and reassessment;

Maria Fenwick

The Only Light at the End of the Hall

At the end of each school day, I drop off my fourth graders for dismissal and make my way upstairs to continue my workday. I will be there for another two hours. Most likely the only light on at the end of the hall will be mine.

This is not to say that I don't have hard-working and dedicated colleagues. Nor do I mean to say that staying late into the evening hours is synonymous with being an excellent teacher. However, I do yearn for other lights to be on sometimes. I feel successful in my work in the classroom and in my abilities to contribute to our school as a whole, but I wonder about the effect—especially on our entire school, including students *and* teachers—of having many teachers who could collaborate and really grow together professionally. Being in a small, struggling school, I have seen the positive effects of just a few great teachers. However, there seems to be a “glass ceiling” of sorts with regard to what a minority can accomplish. My experience as an instructional leader has left me with a great sense of pride and satisfaction. But sometimes I wonder if it's left me with anything else besides the feeling of exhaustion when I finally do go home.

CAREER GROWTH: Two Contrasting Case Studies of Sustainability

Melanie Livingston

Still Teaching

Six years after graduating from college, I returned to participate in a panel discussion among five alumni who were all teachers of “at-risk” students. An audience member asked where we pictured ourselves in ten years. One woman said she didn’t know, but possibly as a principal. Two envisioned themselves working in “ed policy,” but couldn’t explain what that meant. One saw himself as a superintendent of a district. I was the only one who thought I’d still be teaching. Still teaching. Like it was somehow a failure of creativity or ambition on my part.

When I joined the group of teaching fellows at Teach Plus, I was once again one of the only people in the room who intended to stay in teaching, all the way to retirement. I love this job. I don’t need to climb the occupational ladder to find new challenges—they walk into my classroom at the beginning of each year. I have been fortunate to work at a Boston public school which functions well as both a business (where measurable learning is the currency) and as a family (where passion for our doing right by children unites us). Leadership is shared between administrators and teachers, some in their third year and some nearing their thirtieth. My colleagues have taught me that this career is a sustainable one, that when we support each other, we create classrooms where students succeed. The students’ success makes the teachers feel successful and sustains our ambition—and the cycle continues. Most importantly, my colleagues teach me that to be “still teaching” successfully is truly the highest ambition to which I can aspire.

Jessie Gerson-Nieder

A Teacher’s Dilemma

I began my teaching career at an urban middle school in Louisville, Kentucky. The assistant principals brought visitors to my classroom and other teachers praised my work; I cared deeply about my students. I was considered a success. Soon, however, I realized the praise was largely for my classroom management, my ability to work successfully with students from the nearby housing project who had been deemed difficult to control. Few were measuring if students were, in fact, making progress in my classroom, let alone the kind of progress that would be required to close the achievement gap. Although I learned a great deal at the school and respected the teachers and administration, I left Louisville determined to be part of a school that was devoted to the hard and necessary work of closing the achievement gap and building greater equity.

I now work at a school that in many ways fits that description—a Title I charter school in Somerville where teachers collaborate, and use data in their decision-making, where the principal is a true instructional leader, and, most importantly, where students succeed. Ninety-eight percent of our seniors go to college. But teacher retention is a huge issue. I often work more than seventy hours a week, analyzing data from both student work and state assessments, creating unit and lesson plans that are vertically and horizontally aligned with the other educators in my building, many of whom are in their first few years of teaching. And that is without taking into account the most wonderful and time-consuming part of the job—developing relationships with students and their families and cultivating and maintaining a warm, safe, and academically rigorous classroom environment. I love teaching in a school that is so committed to social equity and so successful in its mission, but I cannot imagine being able to buy a house given my salary, or how I would raise a family while working these kinds of hours. It is a trade off I can make right now but will not be able to make forever.

- Evidence of parent and community involvement;
- Letters of recommendation demonstrating collaboration and an openness to observation and feedback;
- A video clip of the candidate's classroom teaching; and
- Student achievement data from city or state assessments.

We, as teachers, are interested in working with researchers and policymakers to develop a high-quality process for identifying successful urban teachers that allows us to target incentives toward retaining them and supporting their movement to hard-to-staff schools.

Career Growth with a Focus on Continued Classroom Teaching

Historically, the primary avenue of career growth for teachers has been out of the classroom. Achievement-oriented teachers often leave the classroom for administrative positions. We believe that it is possible to provide excellent teachers with career growth opportunities, tap their leadership potential *and* keep them in the classroom where they can continue to provide excellent instruction and support to students who need it the most. Successful and ambitious teachers need professional growth that rewards them for excellence within the classroom and allows them to stay there without stagnating.

The EC staffing model is premised on the idea that we must create career growth opportunities that allow continued commitment to the classroom. This belief is based on our own experiences as teachers and is borne out by research. In March 2008 more than 40,000 Massachusetts teachers were surveyed regarding their perceptions of themselves, their schools, their students, and the teaching profession. The results were instructive. Teachers cited teacher empowerment and school leadership as the two most important factors in choosing to remain at a school. Teachers who want to stay at their current school were two to three times more likely to describe their work environment as “trusting and supportive” and believe they are “engaged in decision making within their schools.” Teachers cited a positive and empowering work environment as a crucial factor in their willingness to work at a “hard-to-staff” school. Less than half of surveyed teachers, however, reported feeling this sense of empowerment in the leadership and decision-making processes at their current school and the numbers were lower for teachers working in high-poverty schools.³³

EC schools will operate with a model of distributed leadership that draws on teacher expertise to advance all aspects of school improvement. Selection as an Excellence Corps teacher would mark a significant achievement in one's teaching career, a growth and progression that would reinforce classroom excellence and keep exemplary teachers in the classroom. The EC model assumes that not only is teacher leadership paramount, but that it takes many forms. One teacher might take on a department chair position and receive financial compensation, another might work as the school's data analyst and receive a reduced class load in exchange, while another might focus exclusively on classroom teaching and attaining a new level of mastery, maintaining a full class schedule. By acknowledging the central importance of teacher leadership while leaving leadership an open concept, EC schools are able to assess and meet their own needs creating a more effective and school-specific leadership structure while fostering the sense of empowerment that teachers have named so critical to their work environment.

Differentiated Pay

As noted in the research synthesis, the challenge of retaining experienced, effective teachers in low-performing schools is substantial and widespread. A problem of this magnitude demands a comprehensive approach that incorporates multiple types of incentives at once. This must include financial incentives. We echo the sentiments of our colleagues working with the Center for Teaching Quality and agree that a new model of compensation—one which values teachers' commitment to high-need students and rewards effective teaching—is the “system students deserve.”³⁴

The notion of market pay for teachers in low-performing schools has been gaining traction across the country. A 2007 survey showed that 80% of teachers favored financial incentives for teachers who work in “tough neighborhoods with low-performing schools.”³⁵ We are encouraged that President Obama has called for pay reform that is “done with teachers, not to them”³⁶ and that the new head of the American Federation of Teachers has expressed openness to considering differential pay as a means of addressing the inequitable distribution of teachers.³⁷

The appeal of properly constructed financial incentives is more than theoretical. In its first year, Denver’s ProComp market incentive of a three percent increase in base pay for hard-to-staff positions garnered 586 more teacher applications for those positions.³⁸ We believe a key reason teachers support Denver’s performance-based pay system is because it was developed in collaboration with them.³⁹

Teachers selected to the Excellence Corps and hired to work in EC schools will receive a base salary increase of ten percent. Teachers serving in formal teacher leadership roles will be compensated with supplemental pay or a reduced teaching load. In addition, all teachers in EC schools will be eligible for bonuses if the school meets its schoolwide achievement goals and the teacher meets his/her individual achievement goal. The bonus structure would incorporate individual and school-wide achievement goals that:

- Center on student growth;
- Are based on multiple sources of measurable data, including but not limited to: test scores, performance assessments, teacher/family outreach.

Schoolwide goals should be set yearly, with decisions made at building level, not the district or state level.

Dramatic Culture Change

Strong teachers avoid the poorest-performing schools not because they lack a passionate commitment to students, but because the *culture* of those schools can work against their passion. The Massachusetts Teaching Excellence Collaborative is founded on the belief that culture will be transformed by a critical mass of highly effective teachers and a leader equipped to tap into their expertise.

We envision a number of ways in which all teachers in Excellence Collaborative schools will actively build on the foundation for culture change that was created through re-staffing the school. Excellent teachers desire the collaboration and support of like-minded colleagues and cite a collaborative work environment as the highest leverage factor in bringing them to a high-need school.⁴⁰ Hence, structured time for teacher collaboration will be essential among all teachers in EC schools. We suggest re-designing the school schedule to ensure regular, protected time for collaboration during which Excellence Corps teachers might model data-driven instruction and facilitate conversations about teaching and learning.

Novice teachers and teachers who are trying to achieve their fullest potential will benefit from the mentoring of excellent teachers in order to develop into such teachers themselves. Finally, the presence of a critical mass of both excellent teachers and teachers who are committed to becoming excellent leads to a school culture of collaboration and high expectations for performance.

In our vision, an Excellence Collaborative school will re-open each summer with a teacher-led, two-week intensive summer institute. Though the focus will be customized to meet the specific needs of the school, the institute should

A Note on Principal Leadership

While we believe that teachers are a key piece of any turnaround solution, replacing the principal is equally critical. We envision most EC schools to start their first year with a new principal. Though this proposal focuses on our areas of expertise as teachers, we believe principal leadership is an essential complement to our model. Several programs currently exist to train principals for the challenges of turning around low-performing schools (such as New Leaders for New Schools). These might serve as ideal partnerships for EC schools.

promote a team-oriented approach to school improvement through activities such as:

- Data analysis to determine current strengths and weaknesses,
- Schoolwide goal setting, and
- Establishing schoolwide expectations for evaluating student work.

On-going teacher-led professional development will be embedded throughout the year.

We expect that one of the positive outcomes of a changed culture is improved sustainability for classroom teachers. A negative school environment is inimical to professional longevity; teachers will move on to another school or another job where they can find adequate support. At EC schools, the positive environment will promote job satisfaction and retention. In addition, when there is a large pool of excellent teachers, leadership can be spread out in such a way that school improvement becomes manageable and sustainable.

Conclusion

Overcoming the shameful and persistent inequity in urban education will require that we channel our most talented and dedicated teachers to our lowest-performing schools. The Massachusetts Teaching Excellence Collaborative facilitates the transformation of these underperforming schools by providing the incentives and structures necessary to attract, retain, and meaningfully develop dedicated and successful mid-career teachers. As a group of early-career teachers, we have listened to the voices of past and current research, deliberated with individuals engaged in ongoing reform, and built consensus out of our own experiences in urban education. We believe the EC model will create opportunities for students to receive the continuity and quality in education that leads to achievement as well as create avenues to challenge, harness and sharpen teachers through a second stage of their careers.

Michelle LaMarca

A challenge not to become jaded

I spent my first two years of teaching in a public school in Baltimore, which had a reputation for being one of the worst in the city. As a new teacher, I was determined not to let this reputation affect my belief that all students can achieve. I assumed all educators would share that belief.

I was naïve. The culture in my school was not focused around student achievement. In fact, it frequently seemed like student achievement was a low priority, if a priority at all. I will never forget the day a veteran teacher of 29 years told me that I was wasting my time planning lessons and making worksheets, because “these kids are never going to listen and they ain’t going to learn.”

Although I was able to make significant gains with the students I taught in my classroom, it was a challenge not to become jaded and feel defeated by the negative culture of the school. After two years of this, I considered leaving teaching for good. I did not feel like I was done teaching and I still had a strong desire to continue working with urban youth, but I knew if I stayed I would eventually burn out from work and frustration.

I moved to Boston still undecided about my career path, and reluctantly took an interview at an urban charter school. The overall culture of the school was so positive and supportive of both students and staff. It was clear that every adult in the building truly believed in the success of the students and that student achievement was the number one priority. I felt as though I had entered a sort of teaching dreamland that I never knew existed. I knew then that I would continue teaching. It wasn’t more money, a lighter workload or a leadership position that kept me in the profession. It was the opportunity to work in a school with a positive culture based and focused on student achievement.

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About Teach Plus

The mission of Teach Plus is to support the retention of high quality teachers into a second stage of their careers by expanding leadership opportunities and incentives for those who demonstrate success in the classroom. It is founded on the premise that teachers want to learn and grow in the profession, and want to ensure that their development results in increased learning among their students. In order for schools to dramatically improve student achievement, teaching must become a career that motivates and rewards continuous improvement among practitioners.

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